

## How do we live?: thoughts on compiling an A-Z of contemporary habitation

*'It's time to start dreaming of home and not be afraid of waking up. It's within our grasp and it's real...'.<sup>1</sup>*

Seeking a place to live, in an unauthorised or unrecognised location, is no new matter: squatting laws for England go back to 1381. Examples of the fabric and forms of these types of dwellings are recorded in David Spero's ecomodernist photographs; the handmade houses of Woodstock, New York, or those documented by Lloyd Kahn; and the projects and writings of Stewart Brand. They include living on boats and barges; in vans, caravans, and trains; short-term housing and live-in guardians; tree-houses; prefabs and containers; tents, yurts and bivouacs; social, community and co-op projects; slums and squats; turf, eco, strawbale and underground; huts, sheds and shacks. Ingenious and unusual methods of habitation continue to appear: so what are the options for someone looking to occupy such a place and why has such an urgency arisen around the subject?



A certain amount of anxiety around housing can be attributed to a 'lure of scarcity': the finite availability of land to build on. Within an island like Britain, this means the pressure is on for those without property. In 2010, the BBC reported that: 'The average house now costs more than six times the average wage. In London the figure is closer to nine times. It has led to fears that many people will not be able to buy a first home, or a larger one'.<sup>2</sup> Following the 50% cut to social housing in 2010, the chief executive for the Chartered Institute of Housing suggested: 'There will be an increasing number of people who just won't be able to afford somewhere to live'.<sup>3</sup>

Given these doom-laden projections, what possibilities are there for living within extreme pressures of space and cost?<sup>4</sup> What will home look like in the future? Here are some suggestions on the matter. I am in the midst of these concerns, evaluating them for myself and my family, whilst putting together an A-Z of contemporary living. Insights from inhabitants of these alternative residences reveal approaches from diverse backgrounds:

professional singletons, architects, travellers, artists, bohemians and those caught up in environments of political and natural disaster. I am gathering these experiences and ideas into a free resource for finding somewhere to live, as well as constituting a snapshot of an active, but under-recorded movement. Working with the educational format of the A-Z draws attention to the pressures on, and intention to reach out to, younger generations. Within this process, I endeavour to address the fundamental desire to make a home, examining the delicate issues around how people are managing to live in adverse situations.


Often, those seeking lodgings of this kind – aside from recognised housing stock – find their circumstances necessitate other ways of being. A need for space for family or work; lack of regular wages or funds; a longing to be solitary; ethical and ecological concerns or social callings (including care and support requirements). The way that families are made up is changing too: '... fragmenting into a wide variety of households [that include] single parent homes, multi-generational homes, homes that contain offices... Small, mass-produced identical houses set row upon row cannot accommodate the extraordinary variety of use patterns homes are put to today'.<sup>5</sup> The number of women living alone, aged 25-44, has also doubled in the last two decades. Despite these varying requirements, it is not true to say that all these households seek to become static, 'alternative homeowners'. Many move between temporary forms of accommodation, thriving on the freedom and flexibility of commitment. Independence of existence rings through. Cut loose from landlords, agents, mortgages, council tax, parking permits, land rights, planning permission, neighbours and noise and light pollution.

Being fluid does not suit everyone, requiring an appropriate portfolio of techniques to counteract vulnerabilities. For instance, living in a vehicle: 'Ordinary caravans are harder to disguise than old council trailers or box wagons... You can leave a trailer behind if you go out for the evening with the car, but with a lorry or coach you have to pack everything up each time you move'.<sup>6</sup> Many would feel more restricted by a lifestyle that involves packing a van each day, than one that requires budgeting for a mortgage each month. So what stimulus is making some individuals choose the van?


A friend sitting on the 'brow' of his narrowboat with tea brewed over his own stove says there is nothing that tastes better. Aside from the fresh air, calm water and distant train going by, deep

satisfaction comes from knowing the place is his own. A Harvard survey found 'Strong and consistent evidence indicates that homeowners are more likely to: a) be satisfied with their homes and neighbourhoods; b) participate in voluntary and political activities; and c) stay in their homes longer, contributing to neighborhood stability'.<sup>7</sup>

What is it about choosing the place where you reside rather than fitting in to someone else's idiom – to only 'put up with' the things that you choose to? Room to tailor your environment, or even make it bespoke. Alain de Botton suggests '... those places with an outlook which matches and legitimates our own, we tend to honour with the term "home"'.<sup>8</sup> There is a fug that sits on a neighbourhood that has a high itinerant, rental population. Hedges grow out over pavements; cardboard covers holes in windows; clothes, toys and building materials sit in yards for months. All symptomatic of buildings that are not cared for, and underlying that, residents' lack of attachment to a place. Perhaps this stems from '... an unease inscribed with both a sense of loss of that earlier seamless emplacement we have thought we had, as well as not yet having a coherent alternative to inhabit'.<sup>9</sup> Rent, hire, let. To 'let' someone do something is to *allow* them to – an exchange tied to a status. At the discretion of someone else, by the grace of... But what does 'ownership' mean? Purchasing your own four walls may put in place the appearance of a 'home', but it does not automatically put you at ease or make you settled. As a tenant you may more actively occupy a property: work the garden, paint walls, put up pictures.

Despite the trend for making squatting illegal, squatters will soon constitute one-third of the world population, with 'squatter cities' growing around the globe. Their shelters are borrowed or built from discarded materials, in close proximity to many others. According to Stewart Brand  'The people who build the shanties take pride in them and are always working to improve them'.<sup>10</sup> Beyond doubt these efforts extend past mere existence, embodying the conviction 'I am here, now', whether in the midst of the city, a mud roundhouse on a moor or lodged in a lighthouse. In the case of change-of-use dwellings (shipping containers, vehicles or commercial buildings), 'to appropriate' can mean 'to devote oneself to', as well as to take possession of. This devotion is the key to a home, to a place to be yourself. It entails enormous perseverance, amassing of skills and inventiveness.

The internet has made the practicalities of doing it more transparent and possible, especially when starting from scratch. Plans, materials and advice are abundant, as are those who need help. A brief glance at one forum: 'I'm building a strawbale house in Denmark', '...Tire housing, where can I get information on that?', 'I am going to build a rammed earth home'.<sup>11</sup> It is also possible to test out structures and scenarios by holidaying in a beach hut, yurt, vintage caravan or treehouse.

It is not just in cities that these novel homes are called for, but it is there that many are found. In 2007 the population in urban areas in the UK became equal to those in rural areas, as people  continue to move to cities from the countryside. Lammas works on low-impact rural initiatives, prioritising 'land-based livelihoods, carbon-neutral houses which blend into the landscape and a positive contribution to society'.<sup>12</sup> The group are immersed in establishing an ecovillage, thanks to Pembrokeshire's new planning policy on low-impact development: '... development which, by virtue of its low or benign environmental impact, may be allowed in locations where conventional development is not permitted'.<sup>13</sup> Unconventional does not necessarily mean non-traditional here. It is also encouraging to note the subtle shifts in planning allowances for those willing to live with a light touch.

There is a vein of cheeky resistance among many of the brave homemakers mentioned. They seem to share Badger's attitude to living underground in *Wind in the Willows*: 'Nothing can happen to you, and nothing can get at you. You're entirely your own master, and you don't have to consult anybody or mind what they say'.<sup>14</sup> Why might they feel the need to resist? Maybe they have experience of social landlords receiving government grants whilst letting their tenants live in unmaintained buildings. Perhaps they are aware of the role that creative populations have in gentrification: looking after housing in cheaper neighbourhoods through hard work and love, all the while signalling to property agents that certain streets are on the up (until they are priced out). Maybe it is an inherited way of life, or they feel compelled to abandon received expectations and have an extreme and unusual experience.

Gideon Sawyer, living in a shed on his allotment for over ten years, comments: 'I'm much more attached to this way of living than to the building itself'<sup>15</sup>, and from this we might begin to

grasp why these residents feel so strongly about the choices they make. As Thoreau states in his classic tale of living in the woods, *Walden*, ‘... our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them...’.<sup>16</sup> Look at ‘guardians’ who inhabit commercial premises for minimal rent; those living in gaps between buildings, or finding home in any number of vessels or vehicles. It is economical to roam too. Recent projects utilising temporary constructions have included: The Jelly Fish Theatre (built from recycled materials and now dismantled), the Foldaway Bookshop, the Riverford travelling field kitchen, numerous pop-up shops, and Portavilion: ‘a portable, expanding, public art project’.<sup>17</sup>

There is a call to all to be sustainable, to live for the future, with a long view. But these individuals are finding that this is achieved through a lightening of loads, looking for short-term solutions, passing through. There is also a feeling here that strength is gained from movement: that ‘today the most powerful are nomadic’.<sup>18</sup> Recently, protesters in Egypt’s Tahrir Square, the Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv and Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London have camped out in tents to draw attention to their cause. Their actions are not a new way of protesting but are indicative of the power of self-establishment. This is a marked difference to temporary shelters for those who have been dislodged from their homes (New Orleans, Haiti, Australia). The temporary shelters found here are not a choice.

But what of temporary housing that has ended up being permanent? The traveller community of Dale Farm, Essex, lost their ten-year battle with the council last year, claiming rights over a site housing more than four hundred people. Prefabs in England were built following the second world war in Spitfire factories, with sections simply constructed into a dwelling of 55sq m. Their lifespan was calculated at ten years, but many original tenants live in them still, enjoying their open plan design and close communities. The Excalibur Estate in Catford recently received the news that six of its 187 bungalows have been given Grade-II listing, with the remaining to be demolished.<sup>19</sup> Tenants’ responses were mixed. Prefabs have been termed the ‘... Englishman’s castle on a very small, personalised scale’<sup>20</sup>, but they were also cold and leaky.

The Peabody Trust has recently used prefab technology to build affordable (stacked) housing in sought-after London locations.

Condensing this idea, the architect Stuart Piercy is working on Microflats: ‘pre-assembly... dense urban spaces above supermarkets’, bringing ‘a more enjoyable lifestyle with drastically-reduced commuting times...’.<sup>21</sup>



Aside from keyworkers, it is safe to assume that those who might need these affordable, suitably-placed flats may include those in the creative professions, with irregular earnings but still tied to the city. How does creative living influence a neighbourhood? The Downings Road Moorings, just downstream from Tower Bridge, have been in continuous use for more than 150 years. The historic vessels are the site of prize-winning floating gardens and provide a habitat for numerous plants and wildlife. The moorings are also one of the top recycling communities in London. The boats are a destination for tourists and local visitors when open to the public, all as a result of their resident artists, writers, playwrights and gardeners. Another playful example comes from the artists Akay and Peter, who installed *Traffic Island*, a red summer cottage (with picket fence and washing line), on a disused grassy space alongside several main roads in Sweden. The door was left unlocked and numerous visitors called in, leaving notes: ‘Everything looked fine when we came by. A little junk mail in the mailbox, which we tossed out’.<sup>22</sup> Nothing was stolen or broken, but instead respondents warmly embraced this nudge toward improvement, supporting the proposition from the artists: ‘What if more people turned the places where they are into the places where they want to be?’.<sup>23</sup>

So how does all this relate to the news that Captain Scott’s hut in Antarctica has been marked for preservation, in situ? Perhaps the sense that an imprint of a person sits in a place: that it physically holds the marks of, and efforts related to, that life. Three million pounds were raised independently to save the fragile wooden shed. Its significance is not just scientific or sentimental, but an emblem of traversing freely, engaging with what is unknown and ultimately the vulnerabilities that nature poses to humans. That is why we have houses. Scott’s hut was saved by those who one day wish to visit the site of the adventure, and those who need to know that such an adventure existed. So it is that all these ingenious, inventive home-makers demonstrate possibilities not just for survival, but for how lives may be lived. They locate potential through their efforts – enabling and affirmative – so that we can feel assured that everybody can find a way to be.

- 1 Simon Armitage, *Homer’s Odyssey*, 2007 (Faber and Faber Limited), p162.
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- 3 Social Housing Budget ‘To Be Cut In Half’, October 2010, BBC. 20 October 2010, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/uk-politics-11570923>>.
- 4 Note also how this might relate to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 10 December 1948, ‘Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.’ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 1948, European Parliament. 3 February 2011, <[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/libe/elsj/charter/art17/default\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/libe/elsj/charter/art17/default_en.htm)>.
- 5 Duo Dickinson, *Small Houses For The Next Century*, 1995 (McGraw-Hill). From introduction to Akiko Busch, *Geography of Home*, 1999 (Princeton Architectural Press), p18.
- 6 Georganne Downes, *Alternative London*, 1982 (Otherwise press), p21.
- 7 The Social Benefits and Costs of Homeownership: A Critical Assessment of the Research, William M Rohe et al, October 2001, Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. 28 January 2011 <[www.jchs.harvard.edu/publications/homeownership/liho01-12.pdf](http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/publications/homeownership/liho01-12.pdf)>.
- 8 Why Home Is Where The Heart Is, Alain de Botton, November 2006, BBC. 21 January 2011, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6151624.stm>>.
- 9 The Where Of Now, Irit Rogoff, October 2004, Kein.org. January 11 2011, <<http://www.kein.org/node/64>>.
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- 12 Lammas, 2007. 21 February 2011, <<http://www.lammas.org.uk/ecovillage/index.htm>>.
- 13 Simon Fairlie, *ibid*,
- 14 The Wind In The Willows, Kenneth Grahame, 1908, The Literature Network. 23 April 2006, <<http://www.online-literature.com/grahame/windwillows/>>.
- 15 Gideon Sawyer, ‘My Allotment Shed Became Home’, The Guardian Weekend, 25 August 2007, p76.
- 16 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life In The Woods*, 1995 (Dover Thrift Editions), p21.
- 17 Portavilion leaflet, 2010, [www.raumlabor.net](http://www.raumlabor.net).
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- 19 Largest Postwar Prefab Estate To Be Demolished, Peter Walker, January 2011, The Guardian. 26 January 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/jan/02/postwar-prefab-houses-demolition-london>>.
- 20 The Prefab Four, Lesley Gillilan, March 2002, The Daily Telegraph. 26 January 2011, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/property/propertyadvice/propertymarket/3300024/The-prefab-four.html>>.
- 21 Prefabs... Trying To Get Off the Ground, Lucy Bullivant, 2006. 27 January 2011, <<http://www.lucybullivant.net/html/showcase/publications/prefab.html>>.
- 22 Akay and Peter, *Urban Recreation*, 2006 (Dokument Förlag), p16.
- 23 *Ibid*, p8.

If you live in an unusual place or situation and would like to take part in the A-Z of contemporary habitation; have ideas about or experience of this field, or would like to hear more, please contact [beattyhallas@gmail.com](mailto:beattyhallas@gmail.com)

Beatty Hallas is an artist interested in public affirmation and how people look after each other.

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This project was launched at a soapbox event for the This Is Not A Gateway festival 2010 <http://thisisnotagateway.squarespace.com>

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Airstream  
Underground  
Inflatable  
Barge Squat  
Container



Mobile Igloo  
Social Turf  
Do you live in an unusual place or situation?

Caravan Den  
Eco Floating  
Guardian



Prefab Yurt  
Rooftop  
Windmill



Please share your experiences and contribute to an A-Z of contemporary living.



Train Shed  
Loam Vardo

You will be asked about the highs and lows, along with practical tips.

Residential  
Treehouse  
Van Slum



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